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June 2003

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"Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed."

—(Exodus 3:1-2)

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Phantom Fires in Folklore and History

by Dale G. Jarvis

For thousands of years, ghostly flames have danced through the religious literature, folklore, and legends of the world. They continue to be seen today, in many different forms and configurations, and are one of the

spirit world's most dramatic forms of manifestation. Yet in spite of their history and geographical distribution, phantom fires remain a rarely studied field of paranormal research.

There is something instinctively other-

worldly about flames which burn but do not consume; which give off light but do not emit heat. They have become a well known motif of fictional and factual ghost stories and are often mentioned as part of larger, more complex hauntings.

Fire in the House

One early 20th-century account was reported by author John D. Seymour in 1911. The haunting took place in a small seaside community on the south coast of Ireland. A large family house in the hamlet was known to be haunted by a variety of spirits. Two sisters occupied one of the upstairs rooms. On numerous occasions, the girls awoke to find the floorboards of the room engulfed in flames. Seymour writes:

"The two elder sisters slept together, and used to see flames shooting up all over the floor, though there was no smell or heat; this used to be seen two or three nights at a time, chiefly in the one room. The first time the girls saw this, one of them got up and went to her father in alarm, naturally thinking the room underneath must be on fire."

According to contemporary accounts, this fire would be witnessed two or three nights in a row and then would disappear for some time before suddenly blazing forth once more. While it was occasionally witnessed in other parts of the house, it occurred chiefly in the room where the two girls slept. The strange flames proved to be too much for the family, and they left the premises well before the term of their

lease had expired.

While this type of interior phantom fire is rare, the Irish example is not unique. A similar spirit fire was reported in Canada, in the city of St. John's on the island of Newfoundland. Located close to the heart of the town is Willicott's Lane, one of the oldest lanes in the community. The area was known historically as Tanrahan's Town, a maze of tightly packed, poorly constructed houses, garbage-filled ditches, and open sewers. The neighborhood produced a particularly dreadful stench, often offending the delicate nostrils of those attending Sunday service at the nearby Anglican cathedral.

Named after a local slum landlord, the district saw some 1,500 souls crammed into about 200 houses, all of which burned to the ground in the Tanrahan's Town fire of 1855. The neighborhood was rebuilt from the ashes only to be destroyed completely 37 years later in another great fire in 1892. This much larger holocaust destroyed Tanrahan's Town along with most of the city.

After the fire, a timber-frame, Second Empire-style building was constructed backing onto the lane. For most of the middle part of the 20th century, the house was occupied by an old woman who lived alone and who eventually died within its walls. The house stood empty for a while before it passed on to new owners, who began to notice a very strange phenomenon.

Different people reported seeing a fire burning in the fireplace, but upon closer examination, the fire disappeared. A hand



placed within the grate felt no heat; the stones were cold to the touch. In the 1980s, as a tenant lay in his bed in a different room on the same floor, his door swung open. Looking from his bed out into the hall, the man saw the flickering of firelight reflected on the walls. Knowing himself alone in the house, he left his bed to investigate but found nothing.

He closed the door and returned to bed. The door swung open again, revealing the same strange light. He got up to check and again found nothing, the light disappearing as he left his room. A third time he returned to bed, and just as he was drifting off to sleep, the door swung wide again and the firelight flickered on the opposite wall. At this point, perhaps braver than the average soul, the eyewitness turned over and went back to sleep.

Fires Around the World

Other examples of ghostly fires can be found the world over. Scotland in particular seems to have a great tradition of phantom fires. One example was recorded by John and Anne Spencer in their encyclopedia of ghosts and spirits. That fire was

spotted in the early part of the 20th century on the east coast of the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, near the town of Stornoway.

A local man, Kenneth MacDonald, had been out with four friends when a huge flame burst into being from the ground near them. All of them saw the strange fire and were so terrified that they ran to their homes. Locals declared that no good would come of the sighting and that someone would die on the spot of the strange conflagration. Sure enough, a young man from the area was lost and later found, dead from exposure, on the cursed site. Curiously, later sightings of the Stornoway lights were followed by untimely deaths in the same locations as the sightings.

While the Stornoway example was immediately recognized as a paranormal event by the inhabitants of the region, one recurring theme of phantom fires is that witnesses often mistake the flames for a real fire. In their research, the Spencers discovered another Scottish example where this type of misinterpretation was made.

In the 1960s, a woman by the name of Susanna Stone was driving a friend home, southwest of Tain in the Highlands of Scotland. As they drove along, they suddenly saw a nearby house on fire. Stone saw flames shooting out of the windows. The Spencers relate that:

"They drove towards the house to see if they could help and immediately lost sight of the blaze, assuming their view was obscured by bushes and fences. However,

as they rounded the bend, there was no sign of the blaze."

After she dropped off her friend, Stone checked with local fire officials, who claimed to have no knowledge of the blaze. Her investigation, however, did turn up another couple who had seen the burning house. Years later, the event still remained in the memory of the woman. She stated, "I saw no people or firemen, and I remembered I had never seen a house there before."

Readers of FATE have had eerily similar experiences. In the February 2003 issue, Mary Crawford told of an incident that had happened to Steve and Karen Crawford near Limrock, Alabama, several years before. Like Susanna Stone, the Crawfords had been driving along when they saw a house wreathed in flames. When they drew closer, the fire vanished, and the burning house was replaced with a house that was much less grand than the one which had been on fire.

The Burning Ghost

As if burning buildings were not in themselves dramatic enough, some ghostly fires come complete with tortured souls burning along with them! Researcher Richard Jones has written up one colorful local legend from the community of Pluckley in Kent, a village which Jones has described as England's most haunted.

Pluckley's burning ghost is that of an old gypsy woman who in life was known to sit against the stone walls of a bridge, smoking her clay pipe and drinking gin.



The combination of vices proved deadly to the poor woman. As Jones relates:

"One evening she fell asleep. The pipe dropped onto the rags she wore for clothing, and within moments she had erupted into a raging ball of flame. No one heard her agonized screams. She was found the next day, a charred pile of ashes, the battered old flask and the shattered clay pipe lying nearby."

Not content to burn once, the old woman returned many times in the years following her death. She appeared as a screaming, howling figure surrounded by flames. Apparently the unearthly inflammability of the gin and the rags is wearing off with time, as she has dwindled in more recent



sightings to a faint pink glow hovering on the site of her demise.

Like the burning bush of old, not all examples of ghostly fires are linked to buildings or people. An example of this comes from the town of Milton, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland. Geoff Adams grew up in the community, and on a number of occasions worked at his uncle's gas station. His uncle was in his 80s in the late 1970s, when the event took place.

While working at the gas station, Adams was treated to some of the local folklore. One of the stories was about a stump that burned with a ghostly light.

One night the uncle had been making his way home from the nearby town of George's Brook. The journey took him up over a hill and past the church and cemetery. It then took him down the hill and back into the town near an old brickyard.

At the crest of the hill overlooking

the brickyard, the uncle slowed his footsteps as he became aware of a strange glow coming from the woods. Coming closer, he noticed a stump of wood engulfed in ghostly flames. The stump glowed in the darkness, surrounded by a surreal halo of white light.

The man had never seen anything so eerie in his life. Too scared to investigate further at that hour, he vowed to return the next day to examine the luminescent stump. The next day he found only a simple rotting stump with no signs of scorching or damage from the inferno of the night before.

Fairy Fire

Other examples of glowing wood have found their way into folklore and mythology. Aristotle wrote of the phenomenon, calling it "cold fire," but more recently it has been termed "fairy fire." In the United

States, it is best known as "foxfire," and examples abound from across the country. One typical American foxfire story is connected to an old graveyard located between Spokane and Walnut Shade, in Taney County, Missouri. This Missouri foxfire has been described as a bluish light about as high as a man's head.

Foxfire also makes a brief appearance to lend an air of dread to a scene in *Beowulf*, the oldest surviving piece of English literature. After Beowulf has killed the monster Grendel, the beast's mother emerges from her swampy lair to seek revenge. Hrothgar, the king of the land, describes to Beowulf the mysterious region that harbored the monsters:

"It is not far from here, in terms of miles that the Mere lies, overcast with dark, crag rooted trees that hang in groves hoary with frost. An uncanny sight may be seen at night there—the fire in the water!" (from *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, translated by Michael Alexander, Penguin Books)

It is possible that some versions of foxfire, such as the burning stump, and the fire in the water around Beowulf's dark, crag-rooted trees, have nothing to do with ghosts or the supernatural. It may be due to a genus of fungus known as *Armillaria*.

The different types of *Armillaria*, commonly called oak fungus or honey mushroom, cause many similar root diseases in trees. More interesting for our purposes, however, the fungus may glow at night with a cool, blue-green light. If you open a piece of wood with advanced decay caused by

Armillaria and view it in the dark, you stand a good chance of seeing the luminescence. While the light is not likely to cause blindness, some species are reportedly quite bright.

According to the *forestpathology.org* website entry on *Armillaria*, "it certainly is a wondrous thing to see in the night, bringing a strange mix of delight and spookiness. So it is easy to imagine strange and magical things behind it."

As has been demonstrated here, phantom fires fall into many different categories and have been reported in a wide range of situations. While luminescent fungus may be behind some reports, mold simply cannot account for them all. Some of the hauntings, in particular those accompanied by buildings which vanish once the apparition fades, may be anniversary type hauntings, hauntings that are linked to historical events and which recur on the date of that specific happening.

Other phantom fires, such as the burning gypsy of Pluckley, may be linked to a traumatic or emotional event, typical of many hauntings. Others simply defy description, or, like the vision of Moses, may be created by powers truly beyond our understanding. **I**

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